

Upper King sidewalks mark big year for bluestone in city

When the definitive history of Charleston's streets and sidewalks is written, 2007 is bound to go down as a big year.

That's because the recent completion of the upper King Street work is thought to mark the single greatest addition of bluestone into the city.

The workers laid about 43,600 square feet of bluestone along the several blocks stretching from Calhoun to Line streets. That's almost an acre and enough to cover every inch of walkable surface in 17 average-sized homes.

The city's streets started out as pretty gritty affairs. They were mostly sand at first, though by 1690 the young town was using oyster shells for its sidewalks, says Nicholas Butler, a historian and author currently researching the city's early history.

By 1826, there's evidence of some sidewalks being paved in brick. Around this time also was when the city started using "flagging stones," mostly on streets in the wealthier parts of the city. Those walking along Chapel Street might notice that the sidewalks on the



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north side of the street — where the oldest, most imposing mansions were built — are bluestone.

The sidewalks on the south side, where the homes are generally smaller, are now concrete. They originally might have been wood, because the city

commonly used wooden planks for sidewalks, Butler says.

The city's streets themselves remained sand for quite some time, though by the 19th century there were efforts to pave them with gravel and cobblestones. "I doubt they were creating ballast stone streets in the colonial period," Butler says, because that stone was in demand for the city's fortifications.

No one seems to know where the first bluestone came from, nor do they know

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROBERT BEHRE/STAFF

Upper King Street's new sidewalks are thought to be the largest single installation of bluestone ever in the city. The pieces came in 23 different sizes and were laid in a random ashlar pattern.

Big year for bluestone

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exactly when the city began installing it and when it stopped.

It doesn't appear to have been brought into Charleston much during the 20th century, at least not until the city built Waterfront Park and redid the sidewalks around Charleston Place.

Parks Director Steve Livingston says the city wanted to use bluestone at Waterfront Park because of its use historically. "We weren't going to create a new place but an extension of the old city," he says.

He visited quarries in New York and New Jersey and got an education about using the stone, which today is a bit thinner than the city's original flagging stones.

When the city's first bluestone in generations was laid at Waterfront Park, neither Livingston nor Mayor Joe Riley were quite pleased, partly because its edges looked too perfect.

"We realized it didn't look right," Riley says. "The reason it didn't look like what was in the quarries now is, when they cut materials, they use very fine and precise equipment, where in the old days, someone was chiseling it."

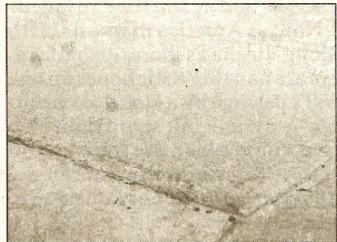
Livingston had heard of a remedy, and the city and its contractors now use an acetylene torch to carefully flake off the edges of the stone to give them a more worn, historic look.

"It works. It makes all the difference in the world," Riley says.

On King Street, the bluestone came in 23 different-sized pieces ranging in size from 1 ½ feet by 2 feet up to 4 feet by 5 feet.

They're laid in a random ashlar pattern, which gives the sidewalk a distinctive look.

"There are so many random widths and lengths that there's



Contractors used an acetylene torch to erode the edges of the pieces of bluestone and make them appear more historic. "It makes all the difference in the world," Mayor Joe Riley said.

Preserving the city

The public is invited to the Preservation Society of Charleston's spring meeting at 7 p.m. Thursday at the Charleston Museum's auditorium, 360 Meeting St. Jonathan Poston, director of the Clemson Center for Historic Preservation, will talk about "The Renewed Challenge to Charleston," a timely topic given the pending work on a new city preservation plan.

no two areas of sidewalk that would have exactly the same pattern, but they appear to be very similar because of the similar rules that were used," Livingston says. One rule: There's no intersection of joints within 6 inches of any other. Another rule is that the joints running from a building to the street are never interrupted.

"When I've seen bluestone that has been laid in a very symmetrical, consistent pattern, it loses character," he says.

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